

THE ULSTER STREET WALK

It was blustery and cold on Tuesday, April 21. The temperature was barely above freezing; clouds and sun replaced each other with a Scottish frequency. I needed a walk, so I decided to walk to Harbord and Major, then down to Ulster Street, west on it from end to end and back home along Harbord. Ulster Street extends ten blocks from one late Victorian residential street to another, crossing only one major thoroughfare, Bathurst Street. It is a street of modest homes, mostly attached to others, mostly built between the late 1880s and the start of the First World War. When I first lived in the area these houses, and the larger ones on the intersecting streets, were often multiple family homes.

While gentrification has taken hold of the area, it is not completely pervasive. The street is not an imposing one, although it intersects three that are: Brunswick, Markham and, especially Palmerston Boulevard. It is an undistinguished near West-End Toronto Street. Nevertheless, I thought I might find stimulus to both personal and civic memory. I was not wrong.

Ulster Street runs west from Major Street, which stretches north to south two blocks beyond Spadina Avenue, the major thoroughfare close to home. In the early 1970s Julie and I lived with friends (and their young son) at the south end of the street, somewhat below Ulster. The two years there resulted in friendships of nearly 50 years, and our first adult experiences of living around the clock with a small child, so the street has rich associations for us. To get to Major Street, I walked along Harbord Street, passing the Korean-owned convenience store that remains open even now, where I have been getting the NY Times and buying flowers for Julie. Then comes the Harbord Bakery, a regular stop for nearly 50 years. During all this time it has been owned by the Kosower family, and the lane behind it is named after them. One of our Major Street housemates, who became a prominent Classical scholar, and who died very recently, had a feud with the matriarch, Goldie, because he objected to her habit of cutting larger pieces of cheese than asked for, and charging for them. He became *persona non grata* there, and the rest of our household boycotted the place until her son took over management.

Just beyond that, at the point where I turned left onto Major Street, is a cider bar, the current name of which, *Her Father's Cider Bar* was invented to take advantage of the HFC tiled into the doorstep. Those letters came from the original store there, the *Harbord Fish Company*. Noah, the little boy with whose parents we shared the house, used to love to watch workers use a net to unload live carp from a special truck.

Behind the west side of Major Street at this point is an alley called Boys of Major Lane. It commemorates a group of 10 young men, six of them close friends, who went into the Canadian military, only two of whom returned. These young working class Jewish Canadian men had scarcely left the neighborhood before this. Most of them joined the RCAF, and the casualty rates were especially high there. The two survivors were Joe Greenberg and his cousin. Greenberg was a high school drop-out who later became a doctor. More about him below.

Ulster Street meets Major Street at a T-intersection. To walk along it requires a right turn. The home at the Southwest corner once had a little neighborhood shop on the ground floor. It has

now been converted into a single-family home. There are several more of these along Ulster Street, one every block or two. These seem to have functioned like New York City Bodegas as dispensaries for immediate needs of all sorts. The next intersection, at Brunswick Street, features a small park, that is mainly a playground, much used until the current pandemic. It is called Margaret Fairley Park.

Margaret Fairley (1885-1968) was the daughter of a Yorkshire Church of England clergyman. She was born in 1885, attended a grammar school for women in England, then went to Oxford. She finished her studies there with a First in English, but was denied a degree because she was a woman. After earning another degree, from the University of London, in pedagogy (this one *was* conferred), she found work as Dean of Women at the University of Alberta where she met a younger man, also from Yorkshire, Barker Fairley. Having married, she had to give up her job. After a number of relocations as her husband took posts that enabled his career as a Goethe scholar, they came to Toronto, where he spent the rest of his very long career. They lived on Willcocks Street, only a short distance from the park if one uses back lanes to travel.

Margaret Fairley became a poet, an anthologist and a social activist. She was a member of the Communist Party of Canada, and when that was suppressed, of its successor organization, the Labour Progressive party. She helped to found a periodical called the *Rebel*, a voice for left-wing intellectuals, that later transformed itself into the highly regarded *Canadian Forum*. She compiled an anthology of the political writings of William Lyon Mackenzie, who led the 1837 rebellion against corrupt colonial government in Upper Canada. When it failed he fled to the United States.

Fairley's own experience in the US was much less positive, for she was deported at the very beginning of a conference held in New York City just after WW II. Among the things she advocated for in Toronto were playgrounds for city children, and the park named after her was one she had lobbied for just before her death. A park named after a Communist is not out of place in this neighborhood. Largely because of the votes of the Jewish garment workers who lived in the area, the district had a Labour-Progressive member of the Provincial Legislature until Krushchev's famous speech in 1956.

Her husband was a pillar of literary studies at the University of Toronto, a major interpreter of Goethe, and a translator of his *Faust*. He was also a painter of some talent, and a drinking buddy of the members of the single most influential collection of painters in English Canada during the inter-war years, The Group of Seven. There are photographs of him "lunching" with them at the Arts and Letters Club in the 1920s. Many of Fairley's own paintings are in the University, as are many that he secured from his famous companions. The ones currently at the Faculty Club were donated on in the early 1960s on the condition that the club be open to both men and women.

Just beyond Brunswick, running into the North side of Ulster Street is Cyril Lane, named after Cyril Greenland one of the pioneers of Canadian Psychiatry. He advocated for the deinstitutionalization of psychiatric patients, and for the improvement of pediatric psychiatry during the 50s, 60s and 70s. He also wrote on the history of Canadian mental health care, helped to organize the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH), and studied the life and works

of Walt Whitman's Canadian associate, Richard Maurice Bucke. Greenland lived in one of the large Brunswick Avenue houses just around the corner.

Just past Borden Street I decided to walk up a back lane long dignified with a street name, perhaps because of the large smithy that once stood at the north end. Croft Street is now mainly noteworthy as a street of garage doors and gateways decorated with continuous graffiti. Returning to Ulster, I pass a new housing co-op at the southeast corner of Lippincott Street, on the site of what had been a Salvation Army Training School early in the 20th Century. The auditorium space there was still in use (although not by the Sally Anns) at least into the 1970s. On the southwest corner is a tiny laundromat, testimony to the fact that many houses in the area still involve shared accommodation.

As I approach Bathurst Street, I noticed that the garage behind the house on the corner of Bathurst and Ulster is covered by street art on a medical theme. This is a tribute to the long-term occupant of the house, Dr. Joe Greenberg, one of the two surviving Boys of Major. He was both gregarious and generous in his practice as a local family physician, usually spending his mornings doing house calls, and finding room for local patients without appointments in his afternoon office hours. He caught over 3000 newborns, and attended many of their Bar and Bat Mitzvahs 13 years afterwards. He retired in his late 80s, and died at 94. His son, David, joined his practice and still works from the same house. Dr. Joe's imprint can also be seen a block further on, at Ulster and Markham.

On the Southeast corner there, is a grey-painted, converted house with ornamental windows and a sign in Hebrew over the main entrance. It is one of the oldest continuously operating synagogues in Toronto, Shaarei Tzedec. Dr Greenberg's parents had been members, and his support kept it going in reasonable physical shape long after the great number of its congregants had left the city core for newer areas farther up Bathurst and beyond during the great move out of the 1950s and 1960s. I recall passing the front entrance once early on a summer Friday evening and seeing mainly older gentlemen in black clothes waiting to enter for evening services.

The name of the lane behind the west side of Markham arrests attention; it is named after Wayne and Shuster. These two stalwarts of Canadian sketch comedy lived nearby, and attended Harbord Collegiate. Their career as entertainers began in the military during World War II. Johnny Wayne then attended the University of Toronto, where he received an MA in English for a thesis on *Joseph Miller's Book of Jest*s, a Tudor-era compilation (whenever my dad wanted to indicate the extreme age of a joke he said, as many of his contemporaries did, that it came from Joe Miller's Joke Book). Scholarship ran in that family. Wayne's son, Michael, became a highly regarded professor of United States history and race relations at the University of Toronto

The success of Wayne and Shuster in Canada brought them wider notice, and they became regulars on the Ed Sullivan Show. When I was simultaneously working my way through beginning Latin grammar and Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* in grade 9, I found the following exchange from their sketch parody of the play kneeslappingly funny:

Caesar (to Bartender): Give me a Martinus.

Bartender: Don't you mean a Martini?

Caesar: If I had wanted more than one, I would have asked for it.

I walked south on Wayne and Shuster lane, but found nothing very funny there. One resident working in his backyard asked how I liked the weather, and I replied that it fit the tenor of the times. The lane turns out to be a dead end. To exit I found a sidewalk leading out to Markham Street, and walked north past the home of my one-time boss, at the Transitional Year Programme Rona Abramovitch, one of the great advocates for equity and access in higher education. She later became the Director of Access Programs at Ryerson University and a consultant to the Ontario government on extending access to higher education. Beyond that I passed the home of Ian Hacking, the world-famous philosopher of science (rented by friends a year he was away on leave). I audited seminars by Hacking at the time when he was at the height of his powers, including one on Pierre Bourdieu. One of my own mentors was a close friend of Hacking from the days when they both taught at Makerere University in Uganda. At one time a number of Canadians worked there, all of whom had to make a hasty departure in 1971, when Idi Amin Dada came to power. Next door was the home of one of my younger son's daycare buddies, which shares a wall with Shaarei Tzedec, At that point I turned back to Ulster Street.

At the next intersection, Ulster crosses the local Grand Boulevard, Palmerston. The homes along this part of that street are large, they are on wide lots and they are set back a considerable distance from the street. Even the street lights are grand on Palmerston Boulevard. This intersection is a great reminder of the Imperialist enthusiasm that infected parts of Toronto during its great expansion during the period just before and just after the turn of the 20th Century. One street was named after Britain's first really successful settler society – and descendants of those settlers were prominent Torontonians at the time. The other was named after one of Britain's great politicians in the early-to-mid-Victorian period, one who presided over the country at a time of industrial expansion and industrial misery.

Beyond Palmerston, Jewish Folk Choir Lane crosses Ulster. It is one final reminder of the left-Jewish culture of the area, but the cultural atmosphere changes as the street nears its west end at Manning Avenue. If one form of music is noted by a lane named after a folk choir, quite a different form is noted by Healey Willan Park. Willan was the organist and choirmaster at St. Mary Magdalene Church. Trained in England he took up this position in 1921 and held it until shortly before his death in 1968. During that time he became a prominent composer of choral and sacred music. Much of it was first performed at St. Mary Magdalene, but had a wide following elsewhere. A lot of it was recorded, but styles change, and much of it is now very hard to come by. The audience for it was heavily Anglican, and among Anglicans, that group known as Anglo-Catholics. Some of it managed to cross denominational (and international) lines: the music instructor at my very Roman Catholic Buffalo high school was a big fan.

St. Mary Magdalene stands at the corner of Ulster and Manning Avenue, the last corner of the street. The area around this extreme west end of the street was once full of people of working-class British background. That changed even during Willan's tenure at the church, and the evidence is easy to find. A look leftwards, down Manning towards College Street shows another new lane sign, *Via Dei Giardini Lane*. This passage runs through a congeries of Italian-Canadian

vegetable gardens, for a long time a centre of social as well as horticultural life on Manning Avenue.

St. Mary Magdalene is still the highest of high Anglican churches in liturgy. The list of Mass times and times for Confession posted outside the church might lead a passerby to think that this is a Roman Catholic church, but the sign also posted there offering equal marriage ceremonies gives a startling reminder that it is not. Those who know Anglican demographics tell me that the more Catholic style of liturgy had a great appeal among working people; more prosperous churchgoers often preferring something closer to mainline Protestant orders of service. For a long time, the brother of William Hutt, pride of the Stratford Festival stage, was the rector at St. Mary's.

Since Ulster Street ends at Manning, I turned right there, and walked north, past a currently closed mid-block storefront hairdresser – the place is called Hairsay – and then right onto Harbord for the return.

A massive secondary school occupies the north side of the street between Clinton and Euclid Streets, apparently built between the wars and marked by Venetian-style ornamentation. This is Harbord Collegiate Institute, to this day a path for the upwardly mobile youth in the area. For many years that meant that it was the school for many of the Jewish kids in the streets around it. Morey Safer went there. So did both Wayne and Shuster. However, the school changed markedly in the late 1950s and 1960s, during the mass move of local residents to the suburbs. One radiologist friend, Michael Gildiner, whose family had settled nearby after coming from Poland as a result of the 1956 antisemitic purge there, recalls ending a school year at Harbord, moving into North York during the summer, and entering his new homeroom at William Lyon Mackenzie C.I. in September only to find that three of his old classmates were there as well.

Four blocks beyond Harbord C. I., at the corner of Harbord and Bathurst, equally imposing but of somewhat earlier construction, stands its great rival, Central Technical School. Central Tech reflected the best educational thinking of the early 20th century, which saw technical education as an important but distinct form of secondary study, and encouraged school boards that could do so to build separate purpose-built facilities for it. It drew young people from the same area as Harbord C.I., but generally enrolled those who wanted to enter the skilled labor force, and those with a penchant for what we now call STEM subjects. The school rivalry was not just a matter of two nearby schools recruiting in the same catchment area, but of two differently oriented student bodies. Central Tech, was never “just a tech school,” however. By the 1960s it boasted one of the best studio arts programs in Canada. The studio wing, newly built in the 1960s, drew both adolescents with talent during the day, and artistically creative adults from across the city in the evenings. The school also had a program in aviation technology, which allowed it to feed new skilled employees into the prosperous aircraft industry operating in Downsview during the post-war period. When I took a night-school auto mechanics course at Central Tech in the early 1980s, the teacher there took a bit of extra time to show us around the teaching area for the aviation program. It was a large hanger-like space, and it contained besides the sort of machine tool and airplane parts that could be expected, actual airplanes. The program was a distinct form of elite education, but for an elite of technical proficiency.

The last laneway of note on my way back to the corner of Major and Harbord, is Albert Jackson Lane, which runs behind Brunswick Street. Jackson came to Toronto as a toddler, with his mother and a number of other siblings, by traveling along the Underground Railroad in the late 1850s, after some of his older siblings had been sold away from the family. Until they were a bit established, his family stayed with members of the Blackburn family, one of the earliest noteworthy African-descended families in Toronto. In the 1880s Jackson became the first Black letter carrier in Toronto, overcoming a fair bit of institutional resistance to do so. The route he serviced included the newly built houses in this part of town. In 2015, the festival that accompanied the Pan-American Games in Toronto included a play, acted out on the porches and doorsteps of Major and Ulster Streets, that memorialized his life and achievements. A 2019 Canadian postage stamp honours him.

Even modest neighborhoods can have rich histories. The limited walk taken here does not touch on the Indigenous past that might easily be uncovered by walking north to Davenport Road or to any of the waterways, still existing or now buried, that served as transitways for the earliest inhabitants. [The covered bed of Garrison Creek is just a bit west of my turning point.] Grander, or at least other, chapters can be written about streets just outside the route I took. No doubt much more can even be pointed out about the places I passed on this short walk. I encourage any reader to walk, observe, research and reflect near their own homes.